



Testimony of
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HB 6659 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025 and Making Appropriations Therefor

Good evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Shellye Davis and I have been a paraeducator in the Hartford Public Schools for 32 years. In addition to being Executive Vice President of the Connecticut AFL-CIO, I am proud to serve as President of the Hartford Federation of Paraeducators, AFT Local 2221.

I've seen a lot throughout my career in Hartford Public Schools. I've known great joy when our students triumph and felt tremendous heartbreak when they struggle. My fellow paraeducators and I experience those same ups and downs as we battle against scarce resources that limit our number and effectiveness. It is on behalf of paraeducators and the students we support that I testify today on the Governor's proposed budget for elementary and secondary education.

We are disappointed that Governor Lamont's proposal does not recognize or address the deep disparities that exist within and among our school districts. It does not recognize that decades of underinvestment have prevented students in urban and poor rural districts from getting the supports and enrichment their peers in wealthy suburban districts enjoy. It does not recognize that the pandemic has wreaked havoc on students' social and emotional development and mental health. By not accelerating implementation of the new ECS formula as HB 5003 does, and providing the resources districts need to truly educate our students, I fear the Governor's proposal further perpetuates deep rooted disparities and asks our children to shoulder what we are too afraid to change. There are no shortcuts to providing the high-quality education all children deserve. It's true that we need smaller class sizes and more teachers, counselors, school nurses and social workers. But my priority tonight is to inform you of the alarming shortage of paraeducators across the state and the devastating impact it is having on our students.

In September the State Department of Education reported to the State Board of Education that there were 1,322 paraeducator vacancies across the state. That's 100 more than the number of vacant teacher positions. Alliance Districts are particularly impacted, but the supermajority of those

vacancies, 73%, are in special education.¹ In Hartford Public Schools, where I work, there are currently over 70 open paraeducator positions. That means students are not getting the levels of one-on-one assistance, reinforced instruction and small group instruction they need to learn. Teachers aren't getting classroom support or assistance with English Language Learners. Special education students and those with learning disabilities, social-emotional challenges or physical limitations are not having their needs met. Paraeducators are understaffed and under resourced, making many classrooms in my district unsafe. Students are suffering after the pandemic and now, without these vital resources, instead of catching up, they risk falling further behind.

Paraeducators have been asked to do too much for too long. Low pay, unaffordable healthcare, limited retirement benefits and inadequate training have forced paraeducators out of the profession. As 10-month, hourly employees, paraeducators earn less than a living wage. They aren't paid during the summer or during school breaks. They cannot collect unemployment. The result is that the average Connecticut paraeducator salary is \$24,000 per year. Most work two or three jobs to make ends meet. Many cannot afford the premiums or the deductibles from their employer-provided healthcare. Some have their children on Husky and are eligible for other state assistance. In many districts, they can earn more working in a supermarket, fast food restaurant or discount store without the burdens and responsibilities of working in a classroom. They love their students and their communities, but we have put them in an impossible position.

The Governor's proposed budget allocates \$10 million in ARPA funds to the Department of Education in FY 2024 to create a grant program to address staffing shortages, including the paraeducator shortage. We appreciate the recognition of the paraeducator shortage, but providing one-time funding for a single year of the biennium is not sufficient to resolve this problem. The Governor doesn't appear to recognize that while the worst part of the pandemic may be behind us, the impacts will be generational. Academic and social-emotional delays stemming from isolation and learning loss will take years for students overcome. Throwing \$10 million of leftover ARPA funds at the problem feels like an afterthought.

We are grateful to the Education Committee for raising a bill that will address these issues so that districts can effectively recruit and retain paraeducators. We look forward to working with Education Committee members to make sure students get the assistance and support they need, but we understand that this bill will have a hefty fiscal note. We will back in the Appropriations Committee to ask you to fund this initiative. We understand there are many competing interests for surplus and budget reserve funds, but the cost of doing nothing is far greater than what this bill will cost. Districts will fall out of compliance with federal IDEA requirements, families will move to districts that have the tax base to provide better services, classrooms will become increasingly unsafe, certified and non-certified staff will continue to leave their professions and students will fall further and further behind. We ask you to partner with us to build equity in our system by investing in those who invest so deeply in our children.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

¹ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BFEoK8uV_oqnTDa_dGYJ99lupYcF1eyB/view?usp=share_link